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ABSTRACT

This paper describes and interprets observations of Chinese children made by an American early childhood educator during a 3-week visit to the People's Republic of China in 1975. It was observed that Chinese infants dispalyed no anxiety when approached by strangers. Toddlers evidenced none of the rebelliousness associated with American children of the same age, even when expected to share toys or sit in chairs for long periods of time. Caretakers gave these children consistent, affectionate physical stimulation. In the primary schools (for children aged 7-12), large group lessons and recitation as well as out of class tutoring for slow learners appeared to be planned so as to preclude failure by any child. School children were found to be friendly, bright, and spontaneous, but conforming. Their conformity is attributed to careful management of aggression in the schools and society. It is concluded that (1) some developmental landmarks which Americans accept as universal are actually culture bound, and (2) the control of competition, aggression and violence within a society does not necessarily eliminate such qualities as liveliness, initiative and self reliance, but it does appear to require the sacrificing of individuality. (CW)

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EARLY CHILDHOOD REARING PRACTICES IN THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA

by

Frances Kemper Alston

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I (We) visited the People's Republic of China in January, 1975 as part of a delegation of twenty early childhood educators. The delegation included teachers of young children, teachers of teachers, directors of early childhood facilities, city and federal licensing and funding consultants, and an author of children's books. The age range of the group was forty years, It included males and females, Blacks, whites and Puerto Ricans, coming from a variety of political persuasions, some fervent, some casual.

We visited five cities in China: Peking, Tientsin, Nanking, Soochow and Shanghai, and spent two days on agricultural communes in rural areas.

In the course of our almost three weeks we visited:

4 Primary Schools
6 Kindergartens
6 Nurseries
3 Middle (or High) Schools
An After-School Program
A Children's Palace (an after-school program for the Little Red Soldiers)
A Deaf-mute School
A Performance which included dancing, singing, and a concert with solo performances by the Little Red Soldiers
2 Children's Hospitals
1 Maternity and Infant Care Hospital
1 Teacher Training School

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We participated in two seminars with Chinese educators and met with the Women's Federation of Shanghai.

In addition we visited:

2 Agricultural Communes
4 Factories
The Air-raid shelter of Peking which is a huge underground city
Museums - some featuring living human exhibits
An industrial exhibition
The Shanghai docks
The Yangtse River Bridge
The Ming Tombs
The Forbidden City
Tiger Hill and the Summer Palace
The Mausoleum of Dr. Sun Yat Sen
and the Great Wall of China

We attended the opera, a movie and a performance of Chinese acrobats.

Our stay in Peking was a day shorter than originally planned. Three cities and two weeks later we learned that the reason for our departure was the convening of the Fourth National People's Congress. This was the first news we heard of the Congress, as it was for the Chinese who immediately set off firecrackers, struck up the bands and began celebrating in the streets.

During our visit to China three guides lived and travelled with us. In addition to these, three or four local guides joined us in each city as well as a small number of students from the local university who were studying English.

We spent our days travelling from one site to another in an elegant blue and white bus with antimaccassars and curtains with tassels. At each site we were received formally, conducted to a reception room where we were served tea and cigarettes and given a briefing by the chairman of the revolutionary committee and members of his staff. We then toured the facility with our interpreters and

finally returned to the reception room for a discussion (and more tea and cigarettes). Members from all levels of the staff sat in on these discussions, as well as children in the schools who answered our questions about their studies and activities.

It is the children of China who are its best ambassadors. They are friendly, bright, spontaneous, and eager to take the hand of the foreigners and show them around their schools and talk to them about their after school activities. They also have all the answers to the foreigners' questions, at least all that we were able to devise. One friend of mine said she felt that she was being seduced by the innocent.

It is the children that I would like to discuss with you. We saw several thousand in our few weeks in China, and if they were specially selected (as has been suggested to me) then China has a cast of thousands to draw upon.

I will tell you some of my observations and then ask you to speculate with me about the meaning of these observations. First: we saw many infants in nurseries (from the age of 56 days old) in homes and on the streets, in shops and in museums. At no time did we see any evidence of <u>stranger anxiety</u>. We walked into rooms often to fifteen infants between six months and a year old. They looked at us curiously, some reached out to touch, none showed any distress at the approach of these bizarre looking Westerners. Even in the hospitals the infants on the wards watched us approach, cameras and flash-bulbs in hand and appeared altogether unruffled. A second observation: we saw no evidence of <u>resistance</u>, <u>refusal</u> or <u>rebellious behavior</u> in any of the toddlers. We saw playpens

with eight to ten toddlers sharing one rubber squeeze toy, no pushing, no grabbing, no tears. In one nursery the twelve to eighteen month olds were sitting in a semi-circle in small chairs. There was a duck which when pulled by a string quacked as it rolled across the floor. Each toddler got up in turn, made a couple of tours with the duck and sat down, serenely relinquishing the toy to the next toddler in the group. The caretakers (or nursemaids as they are called in translation) number about one to every four infants or toddlers. At no time did we see a caretaker with empty arms. There is a great deal of handling, of physical stimulation, nuzzling, hugging, patting. When a toddler needs rescue or assistance, the caretakers are alert and a toddler is snatched up, hugged, loved and placed in a safer, or preferred place. This is sometimes in a chair where the toddler then sits - for a long period of time. We never saw a toddler refuse, resist, try to get up and go elsewhere. The very few toys we saw in China seem to be supplemented by adults as playthings. The adults do not appear to be coercing or controlling agents as the behavior of our toddlers sometimes indicates.

A third observation of young children in China: up to the age of six (the last year of kindergarten, primary school begins at age 7) all Chinese children have slits in the crotch of their many layers of clothes. Since there is little or no heat in most buildings these children wear layers of padded clothes, and every layer is left unsewn in the crotch. When they are infants their bare bottoms are exposed whenever they're held by caretakers. In the cribs, a pad of folded cloth is placed under their buttocks in lieu of a diaper.

The toddlers squat whenever the need arises, whether it's the floor the ground, the sidewalk, the railway platform. Remembering the great value the Chinese have always placed on "night soil" it is understandable that human excrement is not viewed with the same distaste that it is in the West. And with 875 million people to employ, many are assigned the task of sweeping up this precious commodity and delivering it to the fields where it contributes to a better crop. In the kindergartens we also saw rows of chamber pots but apparently their use is not enforced. The children seem to learn by example. The younger ones are encouraged to copy the older kindergartners.

And now some of my observations of older children. The average classroom in primary school has fifty children (the ages range from seven to twelve years). They sit quietly, hands folded in their laps or behind their backs. They respond to the teacher in unison, as a class. Only when the teacher is confident that the entire class has learned the lesson does she call on individual children, and then she asks six or seven different children for the same answer, responding to each with Hun How (very good). There is never a sense of only a few of the group having the right answer. The assumption is always that everyone does. No one is put in a position of <u>not</u> knowing, of failing. Indeed, no child is ever held back or repeats a year, according to the school administrators we questionned.

Perhaps the most astonishing thing I observed in these classrooms was the absence of any inattentiaeness. I searched for a day-dreaming child, one who was looking out the window, or fiddling with his

pencil. In vain. Every child was relaxed, attentive, focussed on the lesson. We were told that slow children were helped by their classmates and tutored by the retired people in their neighborhood who are responsible for the after-school activities of those children who are not Little Red Soldiers. These "veteran workers" as they are called, organize homework help, sports and other after-school activities. There is no room for failure in the Chinese educational system.

What of the adolescents? In urban areas most children attend two years of junior middle school (to age 15) then about fifty percent finish middle school which is equivalent to our high school (at about 18 years old). Chinese children begin in kindergarten to spend some time each week on productive labor, some real contribution to the national production. The little ones paste labels, attach strings to tags, fold boxes. As they progress through primary school the amount of productive labor is increased and they spend part of the year learning factory and farm production. By the time they reach middle school this amounts to more than one-fifth of their school activity. In addition to the two months a year that they spend actually farming or laboring in a factory, they contribute to the self-reliance of their school, growing all the vegetables the school population can consume, doing all the repairs and new construction required.

In the course of our visit we saw many talented, skilled young people and we asked them at every opportunity if they wanted to pursue their talents, their gifts, or these skills as adults. We were invariable told, with a polite smile, that they intended to serve the people in whatever way Chairman Mao needed. In effect,

we saw no indication of an adolescent identity crisis.

I would like now to speculate with you about these observations. Clearly some of the behavior that we have come to accept as both ubiquitous and necessary to the development of the individual appears to be absent in China. Is this all part of the design to create the new China? To what degree has the Chinese character been altered in the 26 years since Liberation? Or has early child care changed very little and only the politically based educational system been altered to support the national goals? Many of us have tried early intervention in child-rearing practice in a variety of parent education programs and emerged with the conviction that child care practices are marvellously resistant to change.

The total conformity which we observed in primary and middle school children could not be achieved without the careful management of aggression (or what we often call aggressive behavior) in infancy and very early childhood. With the exception of the social smile, I saw no evidence of Spitz' psychic organizers; no stranger anxiety and no negativism in the second year. Nor did I see any of the behavior we associate with separation from the mother and the development of individuality. And if indeed, Chinese children do individuate it is in a manner too subtle to be perceived by a foreigner bound by her own cultural expectations.

We were told that about forty percent of China's infants are cared for in nurseries and kindergartens, the rest are raised by their grandparents. Do these home-reared children have a greater sense of self than those who experience group life from birth?

We were told "no" by the primary school educators who said that naturally kindergarten children had more knowledge but that home-reared children also had their strengths. These strengths were not elaborated.

A word about aggressive behavior. Although we saw no intra-group agressiveness in any Chinese children, we saw children in after-school programs perform Wu-Shu, the Chinese version of the martial arts. Wu-Shu has several forms, some of it is hand-to-hand (or foot) fighting which makes karate look rather like tiddly-winks. There are also forms of Wu-Shu which involve spears, Samurai-type swords, long heavy chains, and perhaps, most lethal of all, three metal bars connected with a few links which when swung at the opponent with both hands becomes a terrifying weapon. Group-sanctioned, structured formal aggressive behavior certainly exists. And during the Cultural Revolution there were reports of vicious fighting, killing, rampant aggression against the elitists.

Perhaps the cohesiveness of the Chinese society, the cooperation between home, school and community, the shared goals and uniform means, the eradication of failure in any form in the schools has succeeded in forming reliable group behavior under the leadership of Chairman Mao who directs all activities, even the homeliest. Freud believed that no group could function without a strong leader. I suggest that Chairman Mao is both that leader and, in addition, the mother from whom the child never individuates. Agnes Smedley reports that the young boys living with the Army said to her: the Army (China) is both my mother and my father. The enemies are outside the group. They are ever-present, declaimed in all the children's performances: Confucius, Lin Piao, Liu Shao Chi, and the

Big-Nosed Imperialst Running Dogs (as the Russians and Americans are called). But aggression of any sort within the group, if it occurs, was never visible to us.

What then can we learn from the Chinese? Perhaps that the aggressiveness with which we are familiar is not nessarily associated with the liveliness, spontaneity, self-reliance and the initiative we value. That these spirited qualities can exist in the absence of competition, self-interest or violence. Further, it may be that some of the developmental landmarks we have come to accept as universal in human experience are more culture bound than we realized. That both stranger anxiety and negativism in the second year are expressions of what our society considers a healthy distrust.

Finally, it may be that the control of violence and aggression within a society can only be achieved by sacrificing individuality and the freedom ot pursue one's own interests and potential, when it would be at the expense of the general good.

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